



HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT IT SUPPORT COMPANY



Finding information on how to choose an accountant, lawyer or financial planner is easy. But why is it so hard to find good advice on choosing an IT company?

Each of the professions above has their own industry body that publishes a standards checklist. Yet when it comes to IT - it doesn't even have a governing association. IT has become such a wide-ranging profession that no one association has found a way to bring them all under one umbrella.

When you consider that Seek.com has 21 different sub-categories of IT positions and that doesn't take into account that each sub-category (like Networking Engineer) could be dealing with more than ten substantially separate technologies with unique training and experience needs, then you realise even NATO would have trouble administering this industry.

So how do you search for an IT company that will meet your criteria?

Do you look for a reseller? System integrator? Value added reseller? A managed service provider, a solution provider, consultancy, a support centre? How about a cloud or datacentre specialist? How do you even know where to start?

We here at Leap Consulting are frustrated that this industry is failing to educate the very people it is supposed to help.

So we've developed a simple guide to help you in your search.



Nine important things you need to know to find the right IT provider for your business:

1. SIZE DOES MATTER



Our belief thanks to the advent of software as a service like Office 365, Xero and so on is that if you are a start-up or micro business with just a few staff you can literally operate your entire business without an IT person to help you day to day.

If on the other hand your business is a little larger then you need to consider some other points. For example, if you are the largest company that your IT people deal with, then that's great - you will be able to wield all the power. The problem here is that you are also the only example of a client your size that they're dealing with. So whilst you get the unique privilege of being at the top of the hill, you end up losing out on any cross experience benefits because the rest of your IT provider's clients are a lot smaller and hence have totally different challenges to you.



Your best scenario is to be one of many similar sized clients. If you are small but there are four or five other companies that the IT firm looks after who are the same size then that alone helps you avoid being isolated or worst still experimented on.



2. IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT EXPERIENCE



Whilst you would think a business with a lot of history behind it would be a solid choice it can also be the absolute worst company to partner with. We all know companies who are dinosaurs in their industry yet somehow manage to hold on because their brand has been around for so long. The challenge in IT is that with the constant pressure of innovation and new technology, the older firms can sometimes get stuck in their ways. So while a newer firm could provide you with a solution that is perfect for your situation the older firm might not do it that way because they still do business the same way they did five years ago.



Of course this begs the question, if you don't want a dinosaur looking after your IT support and neither do you want a toddler looking after your business, then who do you choose?

Given 95% of businesses fail in the first 5 years you want to at least work with someone who has beaten that statistic. But experience alone is not enough. You need to combine it with the core attribute of growth. Most companies want an IT firm that can help them grow (in some way) so if the IT firm itself hasn't grown then you are potentially partnering with someone in business who doesn't know what is required to really support a growing firm.

This experience combined with growth mixture is a good benchmark to measure firms against. It may not apply to all situations but if it is part of a wider evaluation then it is extremely useful.



3. OWNING A HAMMER DOESN'T MAKE THEM A CARPENTER



The IT industry is no different from any other where certain products or tools can deliver better outcomes for your company if the provider has them. Merely owning the tool, however, doesn't automatically qualify someone as an expert and, unfortunately especially in IT, just because they do doesn't mean your service will be better. At a minimum every IT firm should have professional service automation software, remote monitoring software and hopefully reporting software.



It is important to ask for a thorough walk through of how they utilise the software and what the benefit is for you and what you receive. A common sample to request is the monthly report they send their clients about the status of their network. This way you can see what you would receive but, more significantly, whether the whole thing is just gobbledegook or actually has some meaningful information in it that will benefit you.

Ultimately the way they use the tools at their disposal is far more relevant to your business and what it means for how they support you. Without understanding every IT support tool under the sun, the best way to check if it makes a difference is to simply add it to the list of questions you ask their references. The easiest question to ask is "how have the tools they use saved them time or money and has it done anything specific they didn't receive from their previous IT support company?"



4. **DON'T BE AFRAID TO WALK AROUND**



Most people wouldn't associate evaluating an IT support company with walking around but it is actually one of the most useful activities you could ever undertake when choosing who to work with. If you have worked out the size of company best matched to who you need and you narrow down a list of potential partners then nothing helps like a simple walk around.

Use the walk around to see where the different teams within their company work and ask to talk to the key people like the service manager, the dispatch or scheduling person, the proactive support people, the account manager who looks after you and even their bookkeeping staff.



In some cases, especially with smaller IT support companies, the same person may be doing two or more jobs. While this might be okay for a matching smaller firm, if you are larger then you may want to think about the time that person has to truly dedicate to helping your company and what happens when they get busy or overloaded.



5. NEVER JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER



Vendor certifications or partnerships are the most common "badge" you see IT support providers displaying on their website or material. So many will say for example they're a Microsoft partner. The challenge with this is no one really polices the usage of the Microsoft Partner Logo being accurate or not (unless someone complains to Microsoft). So you end up with a marketplace full of companies who on their website say they are Microsoft Gold Partner which might have been accurate in 1995 but that's the only time they ever were.

Whilst Microsoft might be the most common logo you come across, this applies to all sorts of large IT manufacturers that IT support companies represent like Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Dell, Citrix, etc. All have a program that tells people what they need to do to be recognised at a different level. You can always verify with the manufacturer direct and they normally maintain a list of accredited partners on their websites. We have included links below to point you in the right direction.

<https://pinpoint.microsoft.com/en-au/>

<https://consultants.apple.com/au/locator>

<http://bplocator.lenovo.com/et.cfm?eid=934>

<https://www.citrix.com/buy/partnerlocator.html>

<https://tools.cisco.com/WWChannels/LOCATR/openBasicSearch.do>

<http://www8.hp.com/au/en/store-finder/find.do?bs=SR2&type=reseller>

<https://www.telstra.com.au/business-enterprise/contact-us/t-suite-application-partners>

http://partnerdirect.dell.com/sites/channel/EN_US/Marketing-and-Sales/FAP/Pages/FindAPartner.aspx



6. PRICE IS WHAT YOU PAY, VALUE IS WHAT YOU GET



Most IT companies all look like a group of vanilla ice cream cones lined up against each other. So you are faced with the choice all of us end up making - who do you like the most and is their price reasonable? That would be a perfectly rational choice were it not for the fact the IT pricing is notoriously confusing, especially when it comes to contracts, and difficult to compare.

In the interests of time and you not getting bored here is a small example of the different ways they may price their IT support contract for your business:

Method	Variables or Add-ons or Combinations or Conditions
Hourly Charge	Call out fee, travel time, minimum times, higher rates for seniors, 6- or 15-minute increments, etc.
Block Hours	Same as above but pay for certain times and get a discount, use or lose, yes or no rollover, automatic refill vs manual, only for projects vs for everything, etc.
Maintenance Only	No fixes just updates, no updates just reporting, core system vs whole network, only supplied devices vs all devices, limited response vs 24/7, automated vs manual, Microsoft only vs all software, etc.
Scheduled On-Site	This can be a combination of block hours with maintenance that can potentially include any of the add-on's or variables. Scheduled time can be only for maintenance, no fixes or with fixes or could just be for say two hours onsite per month but any more is hourly charge, or you use block hours, etc.
Fixed	Many firms imply this is set but it might not include moves, adds or changes or projects, it might have a cap at which point you pay hourly or it might not include onsite or it might only be for basic issues not anything to do with your accounting software, etc.
All Inclusive	The Holy Grail of support that can be priced by location, by user, by device, by network, by application, by month vs quarterly vs annually and can have a locked in term or penalties, etc. Very similar to the current mobile phone plans.

Well if that hasn't put you to sleep you should have enough knowledge to look through the pricing you receive to actually analyse what they are offering and how it compares to others.



7. STRATEGY IS NOT JUST FOR THE BIG BOYS



If you have ever read the book E-Myth by Michael Gerber you immediately know that IT is one of the largest examples of technicians or engineers starting a business and then working out they just bought themselves a job. The challenge with this is if the IT support company you choose was started by an engineer and he still spends his time fixing or installing equipment then how much time is he spending planning how to help you deal with the technology trends facing your business?

There is a lot to be said for working with a partner where the owner isn't on the tools anymore as hopefully that should mean he is focused on helping create a strategy, plan or method of leveraging IT to improve your business.



We don't advocate that an IT support company does your strategic planning but we do believe they should have a voice in what is possible to help hit your targets and how IT may be able to help get you there faster. Even though this skill may be lacking in many firms it is nearly always listed on their websites, mostly because it qualifies as corporate bingo and sounds great. If you want to sort the wheat from the chaff simply ask to see an example of a plan for a couple of different clients from different industries with the details removed. If the whole document is unreadable or in IT jargon or it just looks like a wish list then they may have missed the strategy boat.



8. THERE IS A REASON SHERLOCK LIKED EVIDENCE



As much as IT is all zeros and ones thanks to that binary stuff there are some other numbers that you will really want to check when you are trying to select the right IT support company. It only takes a brief search of IT businesses to see that apparently all of them are the leading providers in Perth with excellent customer service and superfast response times. In fact you would probably be forgiven for thinking they all used the same web design firm. The best advice is to strip away the reassuring words and ask for the facts.

If they say they have been growing then ask to see the numbers. If they say they have awesome customer service then ask to see the last twelve month's customer service survey responses. If their response times are quicker than Superman on Red Bull then how do they measure that and can you see their average time across all clients. If you are going to receive easy to read advice then request a few examples. If the monthly reporting will address all the information you didn't receive from your last IT partner then get a copy of the one they would send out. If staff are their best asset then check their tenure and turnover and have a coffee with a few of them. If they are a Gold Platinum Diamond level then check the plaque and ask to speak to the manufacturer in person to talk about how they work together.

You'll be amazed how quickly the scenario changes when you simply ask a few questions and uncover some of the information that means one thing on a website or brochure but comes out looking very different when push comes to shove.



9. EVERYBODY LOVES A STORY



Simon Sinek produced an awesome TED talk that he also turned into a book called *Start With Why*. In it he says, "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it". It's a lofty premise that some of you might dismiss quickly but the core of it is very important. If the IT provider you are working with or evaluating is in it simply because they like technology then what does that mean for your business? Will they forever be trying to get you on to the latest trend or trying the newest gadgets at your expense?



Three of the most significant questions you can ask an IT support company owner are, why are you doing this, what is your long term goal and what are your values? I am sure you are wondering what that has got to do with getting someone to remove this IT headache from your To Do list but, like the why question, you are looking for purpose. A business with purpose and direction will always outperform a business with none. It also means you can get closer to understanding what drives them and why they act the way they do.





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